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ABSTRACT

This report presents findings from two studies: (1) a national policy survey of Scottish local authorities and other service providers to explore arrangement for providing throughcare and aftercare to youth in out-of-home care under the Children (Scotland) Act 1995; and (2) an in-depth study of the experience of youth leaving the care of three Scottish local authorities. Among the main findings of the policy survey are that most authorities offered a planned throughcare program but less than half of youth had received one. There was evidence of significant variation in throughcare and aftercare arrangements across Scotland, with many authorities extending and improving services. The lack of adequate systems for monitoring and evaluation and for identifying the number of youth eligible for services was apparent. There was a strong commitment among authorities to consider the view of youth in planning and policy development. Findings of the youth survey indicated that almost two-thirds of participants had no standard grade qualifications and most had experiences of truancy and exclusion. Almost three-quarters left out of home care at 15 or 16 years of age. A third had experienced four or more placement moves during their last care episode. The ability to access and return to services when needed was crucial for youth finding their way through the challenges of post-care living. (KB)

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A Study of Throughcare and Aftercare Services in Scotland. Scotland's Children: Children (Scotland) Act 1995, Research Findings No. 3.

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Scotland's Children

Children (Scotland) Act 1995

Research Findings No.3

A Study of Throughcare and Aftercare Services in Scotland

Jo Dixon and Mike Stein, University of York

The findings presented below are based on: (i) a national policy survey of Scottish local authorities and other service providers to explore arrangements for providing throughcare and aftercare; and (ii) an in depth study of the experience of young people leaving the care of three Scottish local authorities.

Main Findings

Policy Survey

- Most authorities (77%) offered a planned throughcare programme but less than half (39%) of young people in the survey had received one. Also, 40% had not had a formal leaving care review.
- The survey provided evidence of significant variation in throughcare and aftercare arrangements across Scotland. Many authorities were carrying out developments to extend and improve services.
- The lack of adequate data collection and processing systems for monitoring and evaluation and for identifying the number of young people eligible for services was apparent in many authorities.
- The need to develop stronger links with corporate and external agencies was evident.
- There was a strong commitment amongst authorities to taking account of the views of young people. Seventy-seven per cent of authorities had strategies in place for involving young people in planning and policy development and 68% reported involving young people in the monitoring and evaluation of services.
- Most authorities provided a range of appropriate accommodation options. Eighty-four per cent provided more than four options.
- Young people looked after on a home supervision requirement and those returning home were not assessed as eligible for throughcare and/or aftercare services by a number of authorities.

Survey of Young People

- Almost two thirds of young people in the survey had no standard grade qualifications and most had experiences of truancy (83%) and exclusion (71%). A quarter of support workers were unaware of the educational attainment of the young person with whom they were working.
- Almost three quarters of young people left care at 15 (21%) or 16 (51.9%) years of age.
- A third of young people who had been looked after away from home had experienced four or more placement moves during their last care episode. Only 7% had remained in the same placement.
- Reliable support, whether formal or informal, was paramount to positive outcomes in most life areas and the ability to *access* and *return* to services when in need was crucial for young people finding their way through the challenges of post care living.

2002

Introduction

The study explored the way local authorities discharge their duties and powers under the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 to promote throughcare and aftercare for looked after young people. It comprised two main stages.

Stage one, the policy survey, provided a national description of throughcare and aftercare provision across Scotland. This involved looking at the arrangements of local authorities and other service providers for preparing and supporting young people during their transitions from care.

Stage two involved a survey of 107 young people who had left care or moved to independent living in three local authorities; and an in depth follow up study of 61 of these young people to explore starting points and outcomes over a six month time-span. Information was also sought from young people's support workers and from key policy staff.

Findings and Issues for Consideration

1 Policy Survey

1.1 Policies and Procedures Framework

Analysis of ***Children's Services Plans*** shows that throughcare and aftercare were afforded relatively limited coverage and suggests that they could be improved in three main ways. First, by giving more prominence to throughcare and aftercare. Secondly, by using the terms more consistently, as defined in the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 Regulations and Guidance Volume 2. Thirdly, by specifying in more detail the aims, objectives and time scales for developing specific throughcare and aftercare services.

Most authorities (74%) reported having written ***Policy Statements.*** Many of the documents reviewed were very general in scope. They could be improved by detailing the specifics of throughcare and aftercare provision, and, as a small number of authorities did, by outlining the means of translating their policies into practice.

In addition to social workers and residential workers, ***Guidance*** on throughcare and aftercare services should be made available to all relevant parties. Only 32% of authorities made guidance available to foster carers and only 10% did so for parents. Also, all local authorities should provide ***Information Guides for Young People***, as less than half (45%) of those surveyed did so.

Most local authorities surveyed (77%) had a ***lead officer*** for throughcare and aftercare services although this included project leaders, service managers and heads of social work services.

A structured policy and procedures framework should include: clear documentation in Children's Services Plans; clearly written, comprehensive and accessible throughcare and aftercare policies and procedures; written guidance for staff, carers and young people; and the appointment of a lead officer at an appropriate level of responsibility to represent throughcare and aftercare services both within the Department and wider local authority.

1.2 Corporate and Inter-Agency Framework

In terms of ***Corporate and External Partners,*** the survey demonstrated strong links with housing and housing providers (84% and 58% of authorities respectively). Eight were joint Housing and Social Work Departments. Fewer authorities reported links with education (23%), careers (29%), health (23%), benefits agencies (16%) and the Children's Reporter (13%). Where working arrangements existed they were generally seen by corporate and external agencies as positive.

Responding to the wide range of needs of care leavers requires corporate parenting. More consideration could be given to extending formal agreements with education, careers, health, benefits agencies and the Children's Reporters. There appears to be scope for developing better communications and clearer procedures for working arrangements and sharing information.

1.3 Eligibility for Services

Centrally collated data on the numbers of young people eligible for throughcare and aftercare services is a minimum requirement for service planning. However, half of local authorities surveyed experienced difficulties in accessing and collating data on the numbers of young people eligible for their throughcare and aftercare provision. This meant that they were unable to identify as a matter of course all eligible young people in their authorities.

The main problems identified by authorities related to: data not being stored electronically or being stored on a number of different databases; data not being routinely collected in specific categories of eligibility; data collection forms not being completed or updated by staff.

In a third of authorities young people looked after at home were not assessed as eligible for throughcare and aftercare services - despite their eligibility for services under the Children (Scotland) Act 1995.

The collection of accurate and up to date information is a matter for urgent consideration given its implications for the central planning and resourcing of throughcare and aftercare services.

1.4 Throughcare: Leaving Care Planning

Most local authorities reported that they provided a ***planned throughcare programme*** for young people looked after in children's homes and foster care. In just over half of authorities specific throughcare provision was made for one or more groups of young people with particular needs.

A number of issues arising from the survey require further consideration.

1) Whether eligible young people living at home should receive throughcare services (as they did in less than half of authorities surveyed)?

2) Whether enough consideration is given to all the main elements of preparation (self care skills, practical skills, interpersonal skills, education and identity)? Only one of the authorities that responded to the survey mentioned all five areas.

3) In relation to the previous point, whether a greater take up (under half at the time of the policy survey) of the Looking After Children Action and Assessment Records by authorities would assist the throughcare planning process, especially by highlighting the seven main dimensions?

4) Should leaving care reviews be more structured to address the range of planning areas? This may include the identification of key planning areas, needs assessment, action plans, responsibilities, time scales, and progress since last planning meeting.

1.5 Aftercare

Core aftercare services include personal support; accommodation; finance; education, employment and careers; and health care.

In the survey, ***personal support*** included young people continuing in foster care after legally leaving care as well as formal policies in relation to providing a continuing role for foster and residential carers. Most authorities surveyed (87%) reported that young people had a named person for contact after they left care, either a specialist leaving care worker, field social worker or residential worker.

Policies to promote continuity of care should be considered by all authorities. Also, more consideration should be given to the process of ending personal support: whether there need to be more formal procedures involving a review by the leaving care worker and line manager and an exit interview.

The survey revealed the high priority afforded to meet the ***accommodation*** needs of care leavers. Most of the authorities surveyed had formal agreements with housing departments or housing providers, and had access to a range of accommodation including supported lodgings, independent tenancies, floating support schemes, semi-independent flats and supported hostels. Also, most authorities reported that accommodation breakdowns were dealt with under the Homeless Persons legislation and that care leavers were treated as a priority group.

Local Authorities have powers under sections 29 and 30 of the Children (Scotland) Act to provide ***financial assistance*** to care leavers. At the time of the survey over two thirds of authorities provided four or more forms of financial assistance including leaving care grants, accommodation subsidies, income top-ups and assistance with education and employment.

The survey highlighted a number of issues for consideration.

1) There is a need for clear and transparent policies in respect of eligibility criteria, assessment and application procedures, and the range and extent of provision available under section 29 and 30 payments as well as from other sources.

2) Local authorities should consider introducing income/benefit maximisation checks to ensure that young people receive their full income entitlements.

3) Local authorities should provide information to young people about their income entitlements.

4) Local authorities should develop formal working relationships with agencies responsible for financial assistance.

A majority of authorities that responded to the survey had a strategy for helping care leavers into ***education, employment and training,*** although 40% of respondents did not. Arrangements included: accessing advice and assistance from careers and education services; offering financial assistance; ring-fencing skill seekers placements; and providing specialist employment support. Less than half (40%) did not provide young people with information on education, employment and training.

Issues for consideration include the importance of local authorities developing a strategy or formal arrangements with regards to education, training and employment, and providing young people with relevant information.

The survey suggests that meeting the ***health needs*** of care leavers was a lower priority than the other aftercare areas but one that was increasingly recognised as needing more attention.

There is a need for more local authorities to consider the introduction of strategies for health promotion and the setting up of formal arrangements with health providers to promote the health and development of young people as part of throughcare and aftercare.

1.6 Involving Young People

The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 and accompanying Regulations and Guidance provide the legal framework for ***involving young people*** in all decisions affecting their lives. Overall, there was a high level of commitment by local authorities to facilitating participation. Over three quarters of local authorities had arrangements for involving young people in the development of their policy, procedures and guidance. This included the consultation process for Children's Services Plans and being involved in the evaluation of throughcare and aftercare services. Some local authorities had developed formal links with Who Cares? Scotland to facilitate consultation with young people. Also, most young people in the sample were involved in the care planning and review process.

1.7 Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation are important in planning effective services. Most of the local authorities surveyed acknowledged difficulties in collecting up to date statistical information and outcome data on young people receiving throughcare and aftercare services.

It was recognised that this could be improved in two main ways.

1) By collating information electronically. This would require a greater investment in Information Technology including expert support systems to maintain up to date information.

2) By the development of a comprehensive database for the collection of core information and outcome data on throughcare and aftercare services.

2 Survey of young people moving on in three local authorities

2.1 Looked After Young People

The first main issue for consideration arising out of the descriptive survey is achieving ***placement stability*** whilst young people are being looked after. Analysis showed that the average number of placements was three (excluding young people looked after at home) and only 7% of young people placed away from home had remained in the same placement throughout their last care episode. A third of young people in our survey had moved on at least four occasions.

A second issue for consideration is the ***age of leaving care.*** The majority of young people (93%) in the survey legally left care or moved to independent living far younger than their peers from non-care backgrounds. Nearly three quarters of those who had legally left care did so at 15 (21%) or 16 (52%) years of age.

There are a number of reasons why looked after young people leave care or move to independent living earlier than their peers. This raises important issues which local authorities should consider, including young people's expectations (wanting to be independent); the age structure, culture and expectations of and within children's homes (young people seeing themselves as *'out of place'* and *'pushed out'* at 16); the scarcity of foster care placements and the impact this has upon 'older' young people (*'I was too old and the foster carers had younger kids'*); and the costs of extending foster care placements.

2.2 Throughcare – Preparation for Leaving Care

Less than half of young people in the survey received a ***planned throughcare programme.*** A smaller proportion of young people who had been looked after on a home supervision requirement had done so. Young people generally thought that they had adequate throughcare support except in the area of assistance with budgeting. It was also clear that where throughcare was offered, a wide range of workers were involved, including teachers, health, employment and housing staff.

Leaving care workers and social workers played a lead role in assisting young people in their ***planning for after leaving care.*** However, the research found that 40% of young people did not have a formal leaving care review.

The follow up study of young people, six months after leaving care, shows that there was clear evidence of a link between throughcare preparation and coping after leaving care. Preparing young people in domestic tasks, lifestyle issues and social skills enhances young people's coping skills. In addition, throughcare provided by carers and specialist leaving care workers appeared to be as effective for young people looked after away from home as that provided by parents for young people on home supervision requirements.

The research suggests that more young people should have planned throughcare programmes. This will require: successfully engaging more young people; greater availability of throughcare programmes; wider coverage of life skills areas; and being able to continue throughcare programmes when young people move. Also, although negative post care circumstances can undermine good throughcare planning, young people can improve their coping by receiving reliable formal or informal support after leaving care.

In addition, the position of young people on home supervision requirements will need further consideration.

2.3 Aftercare

The research highlights the need for ***effective personal support*** of young people leaving care. However, as many as a third of the sample did not have a social worker or leaving care worker at the start of the study and, for those who did, contact was likely to decrease over the follow up period. In addition, some young people were confused about who was supporting them.

Support provided by specialist leaving care workers was likely to be more frequent and seen as more helpful than that provided by non-specialist social workers – an important issue for consideration in planning leaving care services. Young people valued regular support, reliability and availability.

Social workers, specialist workers and other professionals with a wide range of life skills (reflecting the corporate and inter-agency context of throughcare and aftercare services) were involved in assisting young people.

In respect of ***coping with adult life,*** the main issue for consideration arising from the survey of young people is ensuring that all young people are assisted with the full range of life skills areas. Up to 47.5% of young people would have liked more help and support with specific areas.

2.4 Education, Employment and Careers

A further issue, which is currently a high priority for Government, is ***improving the education of looked after children and young people.*** The majority of young people in this survey and the follow up study had poor education outcomes. Less than half (39%) of the sample reported having one or more standard grades and only 3% had Highers. The average number of standard grades for the total sample was 2, compared to the national average of 7. An issue of particular concern was social workers' lack of knowledge of young people's educational qualifications (over 25% had no knowledge of this). In addition to the low levels of attainment, the survey showed that exclusion and truancy were common experiences for over three-quarters of young people.

Educational disadvantage casts a long shadow. At the point of entering the study over half of young people in the survey were unemployed, a quarter were in education or training and a tenth were in paid work. Just under half (42%) were dependent on benefits as their main source of ***income*** and 59% of those surveyed said they survived on less than £35 a week.

Nearly two thirds of the young people in the follow up study had failed to find stable employment, education or training by the end of the follow up period. The qualitative analysis suggests that good outcomes were linked to the availability of either formal or informal support or both.

Improving young people's access to ***employment, education and training*** is a key challenge - but any strategy must be integrated with *improving* and *prioritising* the education of looked after children.

Greater placement stability may help to reduce interruption in education and may also assist those

young people who are taking standard grade examinations to maximise their attainment.

In developing strategies for improving education, employment and training, consideration will need to be given to the provision of formal or informal personal support.

Issues to consider include: reducing placement instability; prioritising the education of looked after children through specific improvement initiatives; reducing school exclusions; and preventing truancy and ensuring the presence of formal or informal support to facilitate achievement in education and employment.

2.5 Accommodation

The research showed that most young people who were going to live independently had received assistance in arranging ***accommodation*** at the time of leaving care. Over three-quarters of young people in the follow up sample had good or fair housing outcomes at both points in time, although some experienced considerable disruption in between, including homelessness.

It is highly likely that this can be explained by the priority given to accommodation in all three areas. Young people's experiences also show the importance of formal and informal support in helping them sustain their accommodation and in assisting them in times of difficulty, including out of homelessness.

As reported above, many young people had experienced mobility and homelessness. Most (61%) had moved three or more times since leaving care, and 26% of young people in the follow up study had moved two or more times in the previous six months. Furthermore, 40% of the survey reported having experienced homelessness since leaving care. Most often this involved staying with friends or in homeless units or hostels.

The main issues for consideration are: the frequency of post care moves experienced by some young people; helping young people sustain accommodation; assisting young people more with relationship problems with other residents, friends or carers; helping young people in crisis and facing homelessness, including young people returning home to family problems and evictions; and young people feeling isolated and unsafe.

Even where young people were otherwise happy in their accommodation, some experienced loneliness, as illustrated by Heather's comments about the downside of independent living: *"It's being away from my mum, I'm only 16 and still a bairn and get a bit weepy at times."*

2.6 Family Links and Social Networks

The descriptive survey reinforces the importance of ***informal support*** in terms of both immediate and extended family members and friends - although it may be important to consider the distinction between contact, offering emotional and practical support and returning home.

The majority of young people had good ***family links*** and ***social networks*** at both points in time and these proved very important in supporting young people both emotionally and practically during their transition to adulthood. Where young people had poor family links they were in the main supported by specialist leaving care workers and social workers. However, those young people with poor social networks lacked self-esteem and a sense of well being, and all had poor outcomes in coping with life skills.

It is very important that all local authorities assess family links and social networks in planning for leaving care, taking into account both immediate and extended family as well as positive social networks.

3 Developing Throughcare and Aftercare Services

Although the numbers of participating young people has not allowed us to make statistically robust analytical comparisons between the three local authority models, the different data sources - the policy survey and interviews, descriptive study and outcome analysis – provide a strong evidence base to guide the development of effective leaving care services. The key issues for consideration are identified above. Whatever authority wide model is adopted, and completed research suggests there is no single organisational blueprint, there are a number of clear messages from the research.

- Throughcare and aftercare services need to build upon good quality substitute care. Stability, continuity, family and carer links and help with education are the foundation stones.

- Planned throughcare programmes can greatly assist young people in coping after leaving care.

- The age at which most young people leave care to live independently and their subsequent experiences contrast starkly with normative youth transitions to adulthood. Most of the young people surveyed have compressed and accelerated transitions.

- The provision of both formal and informal support greatly assists young people during and after leaving care. The former includes specialist leaving care workers, social workers and carers; the latter, parents, immediate and extended family and friends.

- The provision of personal support is pivotal to the whole throughcare and aftercare system, including access to informal support, other agency services and resources.

- The departmental, corporate and inter-agency framework increases young people's access to a wide range of resources, including accommodation, employment and training, finance and healthcare.

- Local authority departments should have a developed policy and procedures framework, which includes specific reference to throughcare and aftercare services in Children's Services Plans; detailed policy and procedures; information guides for staff and young people; and a lead officer.

- Local authorities should involve young people both at an individual and policy level in the development of throughcare and aftercare services.

- Local authorities should develop electronic information systems to identify the numbers of young people eligible for throughcare and aftercare services and to monitor outcomes.

The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 Research Programme aims to monitor the implementation of the Act and to evaluate its operation and impact. Research Findings are published by the Central Research Unit and the Education and Young People Research Unit.

If you want further copies of this Research Findings or have any enquiries about the work of the EYPRU please contact us at:

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Still A Bairn? Throughcare & Aftercare Services in Scotland, the report that is summarised in this Research Findings, is available on the Education and Young People Research Unit website.

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